

Freedom's Slippery Slope

Text: I Peter 2:13-17

7/4/10

I

"I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free." That's from Lee Greenwood's 1984 hit "God Bless The USA" and if you haven't heard it yet this weekend, you will. It's become a second national anthem to some and on a July 4th weekend playing it for a crowd of Americans is like waving red meat in front of a pack of hungry lions.

We Americans think we wrote the book on constitutional democracy and personal freedom, and we're at least partly right. When it comes to democracy we're the oldest functioning representative democracy in the world today. Thinking about personal freedom however hardly began with us. The Bible, which says nothing about "democracy" the way we practice it, has much to say about personal freedom. It wouldn't hurt people like us, who think we wrote the book, to consider wisdom from another book. Maybe there's more to living like "free" people, than we think there is.

Many of have heard of the flamboyant former basketball player Dennis Rodman. Some years ago, after getting into one of his several brushes with the law, he said:

I thought we lived in a country where we were free to do whatever we wanted as long as we did not kill someone.

Most of us would not be as extreme as Dennis Rodman, but is he right? Is freedom basically the ability to do whatever you want? The right to be unrestrained and uninhibited – free from whatever blocks the path of personal fulfillment. Tone Dennis Rodman down a few notches and I suspect he speaks for a lot of people.

Or is freedom mainly about something else? One of the founding fathers of the nation, Patrick Henry, wrote:

Bad men cannot make good citizens. A vitiated state of morals, a corrupted public conscience are incompatible with freedom.

So is freedom mainly what you are free from (Rodman) or free for (Henry)? Is individual freedom our most important value, or are there some other things we need to tell us what to do with our freedom?

II

Freedom it seems can be a slippery and deceptive thing. Just the time you think you have it, you discover you've been had.

In the 17th Century, a ship carrying prisoners to America was commandeered by those prisoners who broke loose and overpowered the crew. To make sure the crew would not try to retake the ship, the prisoners killed the crew and threw their bodies overboard. Thinking they were free, they celebrated and began to discuss where their newfound freedom would take them. Both the celebration and discussion were short-lived when the prisoners realized they had just executed everyone on board who knew how to sail the ship.

Peter the Apostle put his finger on the danger of freedom when he writes in verse 16 of our text:

Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil.

Peter knew a secret we tend to forget. Freedom always makes you a slave. As Bob Dylan famously sang, "You gotta serve somebody." The only freedom we have is to choose to serve a worthy master. A British clergyman from another generation once said:

"There are two freedoms—the false where a man is free to do what he likes; the true, where a man is free to do what he ought. (Charles Kingsley)

When we say the heart of freedom is the right to do what we want when we want we have chosen an unworthy master. We have nominated ourselves to play God. It is, surprisingly enough, a false freedom.

Do you remember the movie "Bruce Almighty"?...

On a day when we celebrate national liberty and personal freedom we should stop for a minute and ask whether we're chasing after a false freedom or a true one. When we hear Lee Greenwood sing on the radio, "*Well I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free...*" we should know in our guts the most important thing has not yet been said. The Christian should immediately ask themselves "for what"? In my freedom who is being served? Is it me and my impulses or have I anchored myself to a more worthy master?

III

Peter doesn't just point out the dangers of freedom. He tells us what we ought to do with it. He goes on to say whom it is we should serve: live *as servants of God*.

Why should we serve God? Because that is what we were redeemed (freed) by Christ to do. It's what our freedom is for.

We can see freedom's purpose in the Old Testament. When God tells Moses to go to pharaoh as say: "Let my people go"...he doesn't say, "So they can be free agents and get on with their personal lives." He says, "...so they can worship me in the desert." Liberation has a point.

They are not here to serve you, Pharaoh. They are here to serve me. We are free when we are able to do that which God has designed us to do. A bird isn't free unless it has some air to fly in. A worm isn't free unless it has dirt to crawl in. A train isn't free unless it has tracks to run on. And we are not free unless we are moving in accordance with God's holy purposes for our lives.

Christian freedom finds its fulfillment in serving God and others. God's purposes aren't primarily about me. They are about us. Paul the Apostle says as much in his letter to the Galatian church. He writes:

You my brothers were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

Valuing something above our personal freedom is the only way to know what we ought to do with it. Maybe that's why the Bible, which was written in times dominated by kings and emperors can say, "So if the Son (Christ) sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

Some of the founders knew it too. John Adams wrote in 1781:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion...Our Constitution was made for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

We live in a nation that tells us we have a God-given right to be free. But what it can't tell us, and what matters most, is what we are free for.

IV

So how do free servants of God live? It's a huge subject but our text in verse seventeen give us in shorthand a few hints: *Honor (show proper respect to NIV) everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

Christian freedom requires we show basic level of respect to everyone. That means our brothers and sisters in the faith, our fellow citizens, and even people who don't like us very much. I'll admit that in a disrespectful, disagreeable age that is a tall order – the opposite is what we see modeled. But we are “free” in Christ not to live that way. We are to honor the image of God in people, even if we find their behavior contradicting that image.

Peter uses the same word to tell us how to behave toward the emperor. We don't have emperors but we do have governments. And if Christians were to honor brutal Roman emperors, it's hardly a stretch to say we are to respect duly elected governments...even if at times we don't like them very much.

Respect means we treat officials with dignity when we like their policies and when we don't. Respect means we disagree as citizens without playing the game of character assassination. And respect means we don't make the mistake of worshiping our government...of expecting it to play God. We can be grateful for its successes and not so surprised by its shortcomings.

But we owe each other more than respect. Peter tells us to “love the family of believers.” We owe the church something more than we owe the world. I don't know what we can say about that beyond what we've said the past six weeks as we looked at love as the cornerstone of great relationships. Freedom in the Christian community is the freedom to serve each other in love. We look to the model of Christ who did not come “to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.”

Finally free servants of God, “fear” God. We offer God our worship. Notice that we do not worship the any portion of human race or its governments – and that includes our own. We do not offer to the nation any of the reverence that belongs to God alone. To do that is to practice falsest of freedoms.

We don't even worship the institution of the church or its many fine members. It's a great temptation for Christians to reverence what is built by our hands in the name of God – denominations, buildings, or causes - even more than we love God himself. To do that is to practice the falsest of freedoms.

We save our worship for God, because only God can save our freedom.

V

On July 4th 1776 the Second Continental Congress approved a Declaration of Independence from Great Britain, which had been prepared by a committee of five, with Thomas Jefferson its principal writer.

One member of that committee was a man named John Adams, who wrote home to his wife Abigail:

The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more.[6]

John Adams was a devout Unitarian. Most of us in this room would disagree with certain aspects of his faith. But we would not struggle with his intuition. Adam's knew it is a very good thing to be a "free" people. But nothing short of God is sufficient to teach you how to live like one.